



Policy Statement on Grade Configuration

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In recent years, several large urban districts, including Cincinnati, Cleveland, Milwaukee, New York City, Philadelphia, Portland, and Kansas City, MO have converted their middle schools (generally grades 6–8) to K–8 schools in the hope of improving student achievement, attendance, and behavior, while also enhancing parental involvement. The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, which supports all bona fide efforts to improve schooling for young adolescents (ages 10–14), recommends that such efforts be grounded in evidence-based research. Current research on grade configuration, however, is not definitive. More evidence is needed to document the positive outcomes achieved by 6–8 and K–8 schools on young adolescents, as well as by other organizational structures. *The National Forum believes that what is most important for the education of young adolescent learners is what takes place inside each middle-grades school, not grade configuration per se.*

The National Forum recommends that policymakers focus on improving those schools that are already serving young adolescents. Whether they are K–8 schools, 6–8 schools, or some other grade configuration, high-performing schools that serve middle-grades students share three essential elements: academic excellence, responsiveness to the unique needs of young adolescents, and social equity. In other words, they set high standards for *all* of their students, create a personalized and caring learning environment, and provide students with the academic, social-emotional, health, and other services they need to succeed. Such schools are also characterized by shared and sustained leadership, a deep commitment to continuous improvement, and a powerful community

of practice in which learning, experimentation, and reflection are the norm.

The National Forum has put forth a comprehensive policy agenda for middle-grades education designed to bring about positive and lasting school improvement. Components of a coherent policy strategy include (1) smaller learning communities and other supports from the school, family, and community that help personalize instruction and give students the targeted assistance they need; (2) a focus on adolescent literacy with support for advancing reading and writing in all the content areas; (3) rigorous mathematics and science instruction for all students to equip them for success in high school and beyond; (4) qualified teachers in every middle-grades classroom who not only know their subjects well but also how to teach those subjects to young adolescents; (5) academic, health, mental health, and other services that support student learning and healthy development; (6) access to an array of curricular and extra-curricular activities that foster healthy development, creativity, critical thinking, career exploration, and civic responsibility; and (7) a fair share of federal, state, and local resources for middle-grades schools and students.

Below we summarize the history and research surrounding grade configuration, along with the Forum's own experiences in identifying high-performing schools that serve young adolescents. These suggest that focusing on changing grade configuration as the solution to middle-grades problems and challenges may not achieve the intended results.

Grade Configuration Has Long Been a Matter of Public Debate

The debate over which grade configuration is best, especially for young adolescents, has long been a controversial issue in American education and continues to be a topic of discussion in school board meetings across the United States. *Throughout the 19th century, most school districts taught students in eight-year elementary schools and four-year high schools* (Manning, 2000). Results for students in the middle were disappointing, however.

At the turn of the century, NEA's Committee on College Entrance Requirement (1899) called attention to the importance of the middle grades, noting that "the most necessary and far-reaching reforms in secondary education must begin in the seventh and eighth grades in our schools." *In 1918, the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education sought to address the problem by recommending a six-year elementary and six-year high school configuration, where the upper six grades were typically designated as junior and senior high schools.* Much as today, the goal was to reduce high dropout rates, prepare students for the job market, and make the curriculum more rigorous, especially in the seventh and eighth grades. This "junior/senior" high school model lasted for most of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, despite the fundamental change in grade configuration, most of the same problems with student performance remained.

Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, a number of different organizations and individuals raised their voices, once again calling for change. All too many eighth graders were still performing poorly on national and state assessments; experimenting with alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors; and not adequately prepared for high school and college. In response to these concerns, leading educators and organizations such as the National Middle School Association encouraged creation of middle schools—generally schools serving grades 6–8—that paid greater attention to the unique developmental strengths and needs of young adolescents. They expected such schools to create small learning communities and introduce advisories, teaming and flexible scheduling so that every child would be known well by at least one adult, teachers could make connections across different content areas, and students could work together on meaningful, long-term projects. *While the number of 6–8 schools grew rapidly during this period, many failed to implement the*

recommended middle-level practices and were middle-level in name only. Once again, results were disappointing.

In the 1980s, the focus turned from simply creating more "middle" schools to making such schools more effective. Lipsitz (1984) published four case studies designed to create a national dialogue about threshold criteria for "successful middle schools." In 1985 the National Association of Secondary School Principals published, "An Agenda for Excellence in Middle Level Education." Soon thereafter, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) produced a seminal report called *Turning Points* that outlined the essential ingredients of effective middle schools. The National Middle School Association revised and updated its own definition of "developmentally responsive" middle-level schools in its widely circulated publication, *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1982, 1995, 2003).

These calls for action continued to focus heavily on the developmental needs of young adolescents and the organizational structures and supports needed to create a nurturing learning environment. This was a natural response to the prevailing junior high school model—essentially a miniature high school that typically paid little or no attention to the special developmental needs of this age group. Once again, however, middle school students' academic performance on state and national assessments remained low. While there was some evidence that implementation of the recommended middle-grades practices was associated with better outcomes for young adolescents (Lipsitz, Jackson, Mizell, & Meyer-Austin, 1997; Felner et. al., 1997), many began to question the efficacy of organizational changes alone.

In 1997, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform was launched with funding from several foundations. It brought together middle-grades leaders representing major professional associations, technical assistance providers, universities, state and local education agencies, and foundations, all of whom were committed to improving academic performance and healthy development of young adolescents. The Forum developed a joint vision statement that outlined three essential and interlocking elements of high-performing middle-grades schools: academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity. These basic elements were grounded in the latest research about teaching, learning, and school improvement.

Research Evidence

A growing body of research shows that high academic expectations for *all* students, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and personalized support lead to higher levels of achievement (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999). More than ever, young adolescents need well-prepared teachers who not only know their subject well but also how to communicate it to young adolescents. They also benefit from small learning communities where teachers and students know one another well, as well as mentoring programs, supplemental services, and other supports that keep students on track (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999; Anfara, Andrews, Hough, Mertens, Mizelle, & White, 2003; Lee & Smith, 1993, 1999; MacIver & Epstein, 1991, National Forum, 2004).

The effects of grade configuration on student achievement are far less clear. “While the configuration of grade ranges may affect student success, little empirical research has been conducted in order to verify or refute this environmental contextual factor” (McKenzie et al., 2006). Most of the research examining grade configuration issues has focused on the school and classroom practices associated with certain grade spans, especially the middle grades (Paglin and Fager, 1997). In addition, several studies have suggested that middle schools have detrimental effects in the areas of self-esteem, sense of belonging or connectedness to school, interpersonal relationships, and school safety (see Byrnes and Ruby, 2007 for a detailed summary of this literature).

Yet, to date there are no national, evidence-based studies addressing grade-span configuration issues, and few studies actually use empirical data. After reviewing 4,170 studies from 1991–2002, researchers at Rand Corporation found that approximately two-thirds of all such studies were qualitative in nature, including scholarship and reviews, unobtrusive or mixed methods, case studies, observation, surveys, or interviews (Juvonen et al., 2004). What’s more, few of these earlier empirical studies actually examined whether a cause-effect relationship exists between grade configuration and student achievement, while controlling for other factors such as school size, student socioeconomic status, teacher experience, and so on (Paglin & Fager, 1997).

While there is little evidence to document the incremental benefits of a 6–8 grade configuration, four recent studies suggest that converting 6-8 schools to

K–8 (or 7–12) schools may have only limited impact on students’ academic achievement when other school and demographic factors are taken into account. At the same time, some of these same studies suggest that K-8 schools may benefit young adolescents’ social and emotional development.

Schmitt (2004) conducted a study of the impact of professional development (PD) and grade configuration on student achievement. Her sample included 292 middle-grades teachers from 43 schools in Missouri, 22 of which were designated as high PD schools and 21 as low PD schools. She found that neither PD nor grade configuration had a direct relationship to student achievement, although teachers in grades 6–8 schools were more likely to be highly engaged in PD than their K–8 or 7–12 counterparts.

McKenzie et al. (2006) examined grade configuration as an environmental contextual factor that could potentially affect academic success. The researchers examined data from 35,000 Arkansas students in the fourth, sixth, and eighth grades (at each grade level each year for a total of 105,000 students per year) from spring 2001 to spring 2005. *They found that grade configuration was not a statistically significant predictor of student academic success as measured by the state’s criterion-referenced (AYP) exams.* What did seem to matter in the fourth and sixth grades was the State’s accountability system. That is, students in these grades often performed better in schools that were configured to match the state examination schedule (i.e., the last year at school was a year in which tests were administered). For students in the eighth grade, who were the lowest performing group, this effect was not evident.

Weiss and Kipnes (2006) conducted a rigorous, multilevel analysis of the effects of different grade configurations on student outcomes in the School District of Philadelphia. The first wave of the study began during the summer of 1996 with a random stratified sample of 1483 students attending 45 Philadelphia schools. Researchers found the following:

- There were significant population differences between the two school types: students in 6–8 schools were more likely to have parents with lower education levels and to receive public assistance than those in K–8 schools.

- Students in 6–8 schools fared significantly worse than their K–8 counterparts on a number of measures such as course grades, failure rates, perceived safety and threat, and self-esteem.
- When school size was taken into account, along with several socioeconomic and demographic variables at the school and individual level, grade configuration had no significant effect on the four academic outcomes studied: grades, standardized test scores, attendance, or disciplinary problems.
- According to parent and student interview data, students in grade K–8 schools did have significantly higher self-esteem and were less likely to perceive threat in the school environment.
- School size mattered—larger schools had a more detrimental effect on student outcomes regardless of grade configuration.

The authors concluded that there were “far fewer differences in student outcomes by school type than previous research would suggest.”

Byrnes and Ruby (2007) also compared the achievement of students in middle schools to students in K–8 schools in Philadelphia, using a sample of 41,000 eighth-grade students across five cohorts from 95 schools. Their analysis used multilevel modeling to account for student, cohort, and school variation, and it controlled for population demographics and school characteristics. The researchers found that the older K–8 schools did perform significantly better than the city’s middle schools as expected, but these differences were related to differences in student and teacher populations, average grade size, and school transition rates. As one would expect, the newer K–8 schools did not achieve the same advantage, despite having smaller grade sizes and lower transition rates, due to the more disadvantaged student and teacher populations. *After controlling for school transition and average grade size, there were no discernable differences between K–8 and middle schools in terms of academic achievement according to this study.*

A fifth study produced contrasting results. Using administrative data on public school students in North Carolina, Cook et al. (2008) found that sixth grade students attending middle schools (6–8) were much more likely to be cited for discipline problems than those attending elementary school (K–6). After adjusting for the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the students and their schools, that difference remained

and persisted at least through ninth grade. When the researchers analyzed end-of-grade test scores, they found complementary findings. Despite statistical matching, there were still some differences in the characteristics of the two types of schools. For example, middle schools were in larger districts and had fewer economically disadvantaged students than elementary schools. While the researchers used statistical techniques to adjust for some of these differences, differences in district policies, characteristics of the student body, and other factors not included in the analysis may have had an impact on the results. While this study suggests that sixth-graders would likely fare better in a K–6 model, it’s unclear how the K–8 configuration factors in.

Taken together, these studies suggest that simply reconfiguring schools does not necessarily enhance student academic performance, although it may have some benefits on young adolescents’ social-emotional development. At the same time, creating small schools or small learning communities within large schools may help facilitate greater personalization which, in turn, may lead to improved teaching, learning, behavior, and healthy social-emotional development.

The Forum’s Experience with *Schools to Watch*®

Based on the National Forum’s own experience, successful middle-grades schools that work for young adolescents come in many different shapes. The Forum has developed a set of criteria for identifying high-performing middle-grades schools that are academically excellent, responsive to the unique needs of young adolescents, and socially equitable. These schools set high expectations for all of their students; make strategic, research-based decisions about curriculum, instruction and school services; have a healthy, positive school climate that focuses on results; involve families and communities in their children’s education; and are filled with positive students and adults who are all actively engaged in learning. By combining strong leadership with high expectations, rigorous curriculum and instruction, and personalized support, they help all their students achieve at higher levels.

Thus far, the Forum has identified nearly 160 such schools, which are designated as “Schools to Watch®,” are located in urban, suburban, and rural communities in 16 states. While each of these schools still has room for improvement, they have all demonstrated growth

in student performance over time. What's more, they have succeeded in closing the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds. While the vast majority of these schools are 6-8 in grade structure, there are also K-8, 7-8, 5-8, K-12, and 6-12 schools in the mix. The Forum's *Schools to Watch*® program suggests that excellent teaching and learning can take place in all types of middle-grades schools regardless of their configuration—what really matters is what goes on inside the school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Today's debate over 6-8 v. K-8 shifts the focus away from the central question that policy makers, practitioners, and parents must address: What constitutes effective middle-level education? History, research, and experience suggest that decisions regarding grade configuration are largely a matter of historical trends, community preferences, and conventional wisdom rather than rigorous empirical research. The National Forum recommends that policy makers do the following:

- Focus energy and target resources on improving those schools that are already serving young adolescents regardless of grade configuration;
- Review and apply current research that suggests that simply shifting students from one type of school building to another may do little to improve student academic performance; and
- Take steps to comprehensively address and incorporate proven strategies for school improvement, including setting high standards for all students, creating a personalized and caring learning environment, and providing students with the academic, social-emotional, health, and other services they need to succeed.

The National Forum has developed a set of criteria for high-performing middle-grades schools and identified scores of excellent examples. Those wishing to engage in self-assessment and school improvement can find these on the Forum's website (www.mgforum.org). What the education community needs now is for more schools to pursue this vision, whatever their grade structure may be.

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